DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 304 UD 017 513

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TITLE Chicago Teachers' Evaluation of Distar for Innercity Pupils.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 11p.; For a related document see UD 017 512

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Economically Disadvantaged; *Elementary Education; *Inner City; *Lower Class Students; *Reading Programs; Slow Learners; Surveys; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Distar; Illinois (Chicago)

ABSTRACT

In the Distar (Direct Instructional System for Teaching) reading program developed for inner city children, the fundamental assumption of the program's designers is that disadvantaged children lack certain basic language skills, information and behavioral patterns, which prevent them from mastering the reading process. This paper focuses upon the attitudes and opinions of 72 Chicago elementary school teachers who have used Distar in their classrooms. In general teachers liked teaching the program, primarily because of its format, structure, and the little preparation time demanded. In terms of Distar's educational value, however, teachers believed the program had disadvantages. This method of teaching reading was deemed to be more valuable for the slower learner, and too remedial and inflexible to meet the needs of average and fast learners. If Distar cannot be revised and broadened, it is suggested that it should be used as a supplementary, rather than an exclusive, reading program. (Author/GC)

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UD017513

Chicago Teachers' Evaluation of Distar for Innercity Pupils

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Distar (Direct Instructional System for Teaching) was specifically developed to ameliorate the reading problems of innercity children. The program, developed by Bereiter and Englemann, is based on the assumption that disadvantaged children lack certain basic language skills, information and behavioral patterns, which prevent them from mastering the reading process (Englemann 1966). They lack the prerequisites for the realization of their learning potential, rather than the capacity to learn. Distar, according to its developers, with its systematic structured and drilled learning approach, is supposed to raise the I.Q. scores and reading achievement of innercity children.

Distar is designed to teach basic skills in reading, language and arithmetic. It was primarily developed for preschool and primary children, but has been extended into the elementary grades. It is basically a compensatory program for small groups (10-12) of children and it includes individualization and grouping flexibility. Children are promoted individually to the next level or group as they master the reading skills at the preceding level.

Distar reading program has three levels: Reading I, II, and III, in addition to Distar language. Usually a year is needed for a child to complete one level. Some children, however, may complete a level in

less than a year and move on to the next level, while others may need more time to complete a level. Distar is carefully sequenced in terms of skills to be mastered and levels of difficulty. Emphasis is placed on the tasks or skills children need to learn, not on their special characteristics or disabilities. Therefore, the tasks and materials are the same for all children. It is flexible, homogeneous grouping by specific skills needed, rather than by the general criteria of grade reading level and I.Q. score. Distar is based on the following criteria: 1) Definition of basic skills and concepts which all children need to learn, 2) Analysis of the tasks needed to teach the skills, 3) the breaking down of the skill-based tasks into logical component parts, and 4) the teaching of parts in an orderly straight forward prescribed optimum rate, accompanied by some slight stress, which is within the child's capabilities, but directed toward challenging, not frustrating the child.

The lesson format, teaching procedures and the repetition of patterned responses are in the form of drill routines. Drill is used to insure pupil mastery of nonidiomatic, highly generalized patterns--concepts. Distar is, in a sense, a cookbook presentation for teachers to teach concept development. A pattern of presentation and questioning is used to enable the child to: 1) model categories of concepts, 2) to make logical deductions, and 3) to complete sentences and word articulation.

The program is designed so that teacher's presentation and responses are preprogrammed in terms of what she is to say, how she is to signal the children to respond, when and how the teacher is to praise, and

how to handle incorrect responses.

Within the context of the lesson the interaction between teacher and children is loud and clear, unison responses in rhythmical intonation patterns, stressed by clapping at endings of words. The teacher does not elaborate on or give explanations to the responses beyond one or two sentence response. But she gives a direct and clear reply as to the correctness of the response. Because Distar is a programmed reading method in which teachers follow a script and pupils follow repetitive drill exercises, minimum preparation is required of the teacher. She is relieved of the task of organizing a reading lesson and can concentrate on perfecting her presentation.

Evaluation of Program

Distar has stirred up a great deal of controversy among educators (Moskovitz 1968). Its heavy emphasis on programmed learning drill, repetition and structure "smacks" of the inflexible methodology of Pestalozzi (Bayles and Hood 1966). Moskovitz (1968) argues that Bereiter's "vigorous-appearing, sensible-sounding cookbook" approach is based on several assumptions: 1) that the black child's dialect is inferior, 2) that "teaching formally correct language automatically" conditions the child into new language patterns and higher levels of cognition, 3) that standard English can be learned by rote and drill, and 4) that a single methodology is suited to all children of various age levels.

On the other hand, Riessman (1962) Ausubel (1965) and others have recommended that disadvantaged children need and like a structured, concrete approach to learning. Passow (1963) describes their learning style as "Motoric, concrete," "thing oriented" and "non-verbal."

The Distar method relies heavily on hand signals and physical commands. Bereiter employed this approach because it replicated the lower socio-economic mother's communication style in the home in which there is little explanation, exploration or expression of feelings.

Distar duplicates this authoritarian, one-way communication format, since it appears to be a part of the child's learning style.

In spite of the criticisms of Moskovitz (1968), others have found Distar to be successful with socially disadvantaged children. Guinet (1971) stated that Distar has been successful with disadvantaged and retarded children with learning disabilities. Gross (1971) concluded that Distar enhanced the attention span of children. Williamson (1970) indicated that Distar met the needs of the children for whom learning to read was especially difficult and added that Distar pupils were reading at a higher grade level than those in other reading programs.

A study by Bode and Suchaniak (1974) to determine the effect of the Distar Language Program on the group intelligence test performance of 100 innercity upper elementary grade students demonstrated significant gains in I.Q. scores. Yungko (1972) found Distar to be an economic and effective method of teaching reading.

In two separate surveys of innercity teachers' evaluation of Distar by Ogletree and DiPasalegne (1975) and by Maillis (1974) it was found that Distar was effective with disadvantaged children. Teachers liked to teach Distar and would use it even if it were optional. Ogletree and DiPasalegne (1975) found that teachers felt Distar to be superior to other reading programs, it saved preparation time, and children liked the Distar program. Maillis (1974) concluded

that the longer teachers taught Distar, the better they liked it.

To confirm the above findings and to add to the state of knowledge, the investigators devised a survey questionnaire to answer the following general questions: 1) How effective is Distar in increasing the reading achievement and sustaining the motivation of children? 2) What are the opinions of teachers toward Distar (structure, format, preparation time, materials)? and 3) What are pupils' reaction to Distar?

One hundred innercity elementary public school teachers that teach Distar were selected from one Chicago school district for the study. Of the one hundred questionnaires, which included thirty-six objective items and one open-ended question, distributed, seventy-two (72) percent were returned.

The results show the majority of teachers (59 percent) thought Distar to be an effective reading program, whereas, 17 percent disagreed. General comments like "It is more effective than any other series I have used", and a 70 percent positive response to "Most of the children in my class are learning the Distar materials", further illustrates their support of Distar as a reading program. In addition, 51 percent felt Distar was effective with their class.

However, teachers did not give an unqualified endorsement to Distar. They recognized Distar was not a panacea. Only 14 percent of the teachers indicated Distar to be effective with all children; 78 percent stated it was not effective with all children. Although 56 percent agreed Distar was effective with slower learners, only 28 percent agreed and 40 percent disagreed it was effective with average learners. Similarly, only 29 percent concurred on the program's effectiveness with

rapid learners, whereas 55 percent said it was not. In the case of EMH children, 38 percent stated it was effective, 44 percent were undecided and 18 percent disagreed.

Teachers' responses indicate that Distar is effective with below average achieving children, but it may not be any more effective than other reading methods, as indicated by their response to: "Children, using Distar, are achieving as well as children in my class were when I was using a different method of teaching reading." Forty-nine percent agreed, 19 percent were undecided and 32 percent disagreed. It appears many teachers viewed Distar as a remedial reading system. This was reflected by the general comment: "It is good for remedial purposes, but should be used along with other reading programs."

Responses to statements on the motivational aspects of Distar paralleled those on achievement. While 55 percent of teachers felt Distar to be motivational for their pupils and slow learners, only 28 percent stated it was motivational for all children. However, 45 percent and 35 percent agreed that Distar was a good motivational reading system for average and rapid learners, respectively. Several teachers made the comment: "Children are not machines. Motivation does not derive from externals," probably reflecting Distar's programmed format. Although 64 percent of the teachers liked to teach Distar, their responses may be more influenced by the convenience of the program that its effectiveness. Fifty-nine percent found Distar easy to use, 54 percent indicated it saved preparation time, and 68 percent liked the highly structured system. This is supported by the general comment: "Teachers can easily follow through from one level to another--since

the teaching methods are the same and highly structured."

However, teachers were ambivalent about their committment to Distar as an exclusive reading program. Only 23 percent agreed but 46 percent disagreed they would like to teach another subject using the Distar method. Teachers were divided (41 to 43 percent) about using Distar, if they had the option of not using it. They were also divided (38 to 43 percent) as to whether to use more than one Distar system in their class even if they had a teachers' aide. These views were sustained by the findings that 46 percent of the teachers would elect to teach another reading system if the choice was theirs, and 73 percent would like to have the option of using another system and/or Distar.

Teachers were also ambivalent about Distar's basic reading skills, "take homes" and tests. Thirty-seven percent of the teachers agreed that if Distar is used correctly, most of the basic reading skills are learned, whereas 43 percent disagreed. They were divided (45 to 41 percent) as to the effectiveness of "take homes" (worksheets awarded for correct responses) as motivational devices. Teachers were in agreement on the validity of the Distar tests; 44 percent indicated the tests were valid measures of achievement in word attack skills, but were invalid as measures of reading comprehension. However, the fault may not rest with the invalidity of the tests, but with the failure of Distar to teach reading comprehension. General comments by teachers seem to support this assumption--"I feel the Distar method fails to teach reading comprehension adequately." Another criticism was the lack of time to properly teach Distar. Only 33 percent thought the one-half hour a day per group was sufficient,

whereas 58 percent felt it insufficient time. This may be the reason that only 32 percent of teachers agreed and 42 percent disagreed that Distar was equal or superior to other reading methods.

Pupil reaction to Distar ranged from favorable to neutral. Teachers thought 57 percent of the pupils liked Distar. Several teachers commented that "My pupils seem to like the highly structured Distar system. They feel secure because there is a routine and they know what is expected of them each day." However, when Distar was compared to other reading methods, only 24 percent of the teachers felt children liked reading better with Distar than with another reading system. Sixty percent thought children liked another reading method better than they did Distar. Teachers indicated that Distar did not increase the attention span of children. Teachers (71 percent) concurred that it was shorter with Distar than with other subjects. Responding to a similar, but positively formulated, statement, only 25 percent agreed and 58 percent disagreed that children's attention span was better with Distar than with other subjects.

Teachers made an equal number of positive and negative general comments: "It is a good program, when teachers are properly taught to use it". "The method is so demanding and time consuming after six groups (reading) in a day, one is really exhausted." "Distar is highly structured, it leaves little creative flexibility, and it deprives children of a "well rounded" education, because other, e.g., science and history are neglected."

The results of this study agree, in part, with the findings of Ogletree and DiPasalegne (1975) and Maillis (1974) that the majority

of teachers felt Distar to be effective with socially disadvantaged children; they were learning the materials. There was agreement that Distar was not effective with all children. While teachers in this study thought Distar was effective for slow and EMH children, teachers in the Ogletree and DiPasalegne (1975) study were neutral on its effectiveness with slow pupils and in disagreement with EMH children. Teachers in this study did not think Distar was superior to other reading programs, while most teachers in the other studies did.

Some general points of agreement between the studies were: 1) Teachers like to teach Distar, 2) They like the format, structure, economy of preparation time and ease of teaching it, 3) Distar was limited in the area of reading comprehension, 4) Pupils liked Distar, but it did not enhance their attention span more than any other method or subject, and 5) Teachers rejected Distar as as exclusive reading program; they wanted options.

Albeit the findings of this study did show teachers' favorability toward Distar, the data indicate a need for program evaluation and revision: 1) Revamp Distar to meet the achievement and motivational needs of average and fast learners. (Perhaps, the program is too geared to the cognitive style of slow learners and disadvantaged children and too remedial in its structure.), 2) Revise content, materials and activities to increase comprehension skills, 3) Broaden the scope and incorporate more flexibility into the program to respond to the learning styles and achievement levels of the pupils, and 5) If Distar cannot be revised and broadened, it should be used as a supplementary rather than an exclusive reading program.

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